

**Subcommittee Chairman Farenthold Opening Statement**  
**"Improving the Visitor Experience at National Parks"**  
**Subcommittee on the Interior, Energy, and Environment**

***Chairman Blake Farenthold (R-TX):***



*Remarks as Delivered:*

Good afternoon. Today the Subcommittee on the Interior, Energy, and Environment will be examining the Concessions Program at the National Park Service, or NPS. Last year, the country celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NPS. Now that the festivities of that milestone are over, it is time to get back to work improving the Park Service system. The NPS is the custodian of some of our greatest natural treasures. To that end, we must make sure that it is performing well and living up to this responsibility.

In July of 2015, shortly before the centennial celebrations, this subcommittee held a hearing that began the Oversight and Government Reform Committee's involvement in these issues. In her opening statement, my predecessor as chair, Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming, quoted Stephen Mather, the first Director of the National Park Service. I believe that quotation is worthy of repeating today. He said, "Scenery is a hollow enjoyment to the tourist who sets out in the morning after an indigestible breakfast and a fitful night's sleep on an impossible bed."

This is a particularly astute observation. To be able to enjoy our nation's stunningly beautiful parks, beaches, monuments, wildlife, and other features, the people need food, lodging, and other appropriate amenities. To this end, since the first national parks were created in the late nineteenth-century, there has been a history of private companies working on these parks to provide services to visitors.

Unfortunately, the amenities at many parks have aged poorly and many have not been maintained properly. The National Park Service must modernize. It has failed to meet the changing demands of its visitors. Millennials and modern families want tech services such as Wi-Fi and internet access. Cell service is not only an amenity, it's an important safety consideration. When NPS does not keep up, our parks lose visitors to other tourism opportunities, such as privately run theme parks and other attractions. Certainly we don't need to turn our parks into a Disneyland, but we need to keep up with what 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans want when vacationing. I want to see my friends' vacation pictures at our parks on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I want to know I can get help in the event of an emergency by dialing 911.

By providing up-to-date technology, contemporary food and beverage services, and a choice between rustic and comfortable and modern places to stay, and unique visitor experiences, our parks become more attractive. This is where the role of concessioners is critical. They help provide these services while providing needed funding to the Park Services.

In our last hearing on this subject, we heard of several instances of bureaucratic red tape getting in the way. For instance, one park had a 1,629 page-long bid request outline that cost one concessionaire 2,500 company-management hours and more than \$90,000 to fill out. As another example, we heard about parks with campgrounds that sell out, but are only open for part of the year, due to bureaucratic requirements.

Fortunately, we have sources of ideas for ways to update the NPS. For instance, in partnering with ski areas, the Forest Service has found ways for people to use the lands it leases year-round. Furthermore, good ideas have come from various state park systems, such as Kansas' matching of park fees with demand.

I hope to hear about these ideas, and more, from our panel today. I very much look forward to hearing suggestions on a way forward from here and hopeful the committee can help update our national park system.